

3-1-1955

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Recommended Citation

Petersen, William J. "The Laus of Scott County." *The Palimpsest* 36 (1955), 127-132.
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol36/iss3/4>

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The Laus in Scott County

When Peter and Marie (Suehl) Lau arrived with their children in Davenport in June, 1853, they found that "Queen City of the West" a bustling Mississippi River port. The town already numbered 4,500, a gain of 1,000 over the previous year. Immigrants, both native and foreign, were arriving daily, those of German ancestry predominating. The Rock Island railroad tracks were being constructed feverishly westward to the Mississippi and the iron horse was destined to slake his thirst in the icy waters of the Mississippi on February 22, 1854.

Meanwhile, ground for the Mississippi and Missouri Railroad was broken at Davenport by Antoine LeClaire on September 1, 1853. No doubt Peter and Marie Lau witnessed this historic event. The intense railroad fever of the time is attested by the fact that the City of Davenport subscribed for \$85,000 in bonds to aid in the construction of the M. & M. westward from Davenport to Council Bluffs in 1853. Previously Scott County had subscribed \$50,000 to speed the Chicago & Rock Island Railroad to the Mississippi. Other evidences of Davenport's growth during 1853 were the opening of the first music store, the

inauguration of the first express company, the establishment of the first telegraph office, and the conversion of the *Davenport Gazette* from a weekly into a tri-weekly newspaper. Real estate was soaring both in town and country. Even the most sanguine citizen must have gasped when Antoine LeClaire was offered \$130,000 for 100 acres of land near Davenport.

Since the Black Hawk Purchase had been open to settlement in 1833, just twenty years before the arrival of Peter Lau and his family, the tremendous stride made in Davenport and Scott County must have astounded them. It must have done much to encourage their faith and belief in a land and a people who had transformed a raw wilderness into a highly productive land flowing with milk and honey. The German element was already playing an important role in this growth and Peter and Marie were thankful they had chosen Scott County as their future home in America.

The average German immigrant or American pioneer was ill-prepared to cope with the inflated land prices that prevailed near flourishing cities prior to the Panic of 1857. If an immigrant wanted to farm and had no money he invariably went to the frontier where he could preempt land at the prevailing price of \$1.25 per acre. Frequently, however, he might work in a city long enough to save money with which to purchase a farm or establish himself in a trade. Thus, Henry

Kohrs, who left Holstein at the age of twenty-three, a few months before Peter Lau, had learned the butcher's trade in Germany. Upon his arrival in Davenport, Kohrs worked in a drygoods and grocery store, and then for a clothier, before starting a humble meat market in 1855. It was not until 1874 that Kohrs was able to embark on a small scale in the pork packing business which was later to develop into one of Davenport's flourishing industries.

Peter Lau, fortunately, had gained both experience and wealth while supervising farming on a large estate on the outskirts of Brunsbüttel in his native Holstein. As a result, 33-year-old Peter arrived in Davenport with \$8,000 in gold carefully stashed away in his heavy money belt. With his good friend Henry Kohrs to advise him, Peter selected a 160-acre tract of land in Lincoln Township a few miles north of Davenport. It was Kohrs' plan to have Peter Lau furnish him with beef and pork for his meat-market which was soon to become one of Davenport's most popular retail stores.

Leaving his family in Davenport, Peter Lau cleared the land and prepared it for cultivation. At the same time, he commenced building a beautiful home that stood as a monument to his foresight and energy. Much of the lumber was bought from F. Weyerhaeuser of Rock Island, who helped haul it from his new lumber yard out

to Peter Lau's farm. In the field of rafting and lumbering the firm of Weyerhaeuser & Denckman was destined to become familiar to all who dwelt along the banks of the Mississippi.

Lau loved his new home, surrounding it with three acres of lawn interspersed with flowers and ornamental trees. The home became the scene for many picnics and parties for Davenport business men and families. A warm spirit of German *gemütlichkeit* always pervaded these happy social affairs and Peter and Marie Lau were soon widely recognized for their hospitality and gracious charm.

Two children — Charles W. and Elizabeth — were born to Peter and Marie Lau in their new home in Lincoln Township. Charles W. Lau was born on March 26, 1855, and as a boy assisted his father on the farm. When Peter and Marie moved to Davenport in 1881, Charles married Elizabeth Kreiter, a daughter of two German immigrants, Charles and Marie Kreiter of Davenport Township. Peter Lau died in 1884 and Charles continued to develop the family farm, doing much to introduce alfalfa in Scott County, and engaging in general farming. He kept several cows and was deeply interested in butter production. His special hobby was ornamental trees. He frequently had Louis H. Pammel, noted Iowa State College professor, visit his farm to see the progress of such trees as the Magnolias. After

they commenced blooming he called the farm Magnolia Crest, a name that still appears on the large barn that was built on the Lau farm in 1903.

Six children were born to Charles W. and Marie Lau — Alfred H.; Oscar M., the donor of Lotte's diary; Carl S., who continued to operate the family homestead; Elmer H.; Cora M.; and Victor Charles. When Charles W. Lau died in 1925, his third son, Carl S., took charge of the farm and kept the place up. Carl built a stocked lake and lodge on the farm. His son Norman took charge of the farm after World War II, operating it with the finest John Deere equipment. A graduate of Iowa State College, Norman Lau is the great grandchild of Peter and Marie Lau, who crossed the Atlantic in 1853 and selected present-day Magnolia Crest as the homestead for future generations of their children.

The children of Norman Lau — Norman II, Peter, and Susan — represent the fifth generation of the Lau family who have lived at Magnolia Crest. The rich soil on this productive farm still yields the same gracious living to Norman Lau and his family that it afforded Peter and Marie a century ago, striking testimony of the careful farming methods practiced since the ground was first broken by Peter Lau in 1853. This love of the soil, coupled with German frugality and a deep sense of stewardship for its proper care, has been exhibited by German farmers throughout Scott County.

And none have shown a greater appreciation of this stewardship over a century of time than the descendants of Peter and Marie Lau.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN